

LOVE.

—BY—
ABI. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER II.—Continued

It was past midnight. The threatened tempest had passed away, and the moon, pale, wan, but smiling, was shining above in the heavens. A few stars twinkled merrily overhead, and the tall mountains towered proudly above the stunted trees below their frowning brows.

How still it was! Not a sound broke the almost deathly silence of the night, and the hour, weird and uncanny, added to the loneliness of the scene. A strange place, and a still stranger hour for a bride to leave the altar, as it were.

Close behind them with noiseless steps, came the gypsy, Lauretta, her dark face looking like a piece of dusky marble in the pallid rays of moonlight. Her eyes seemed like twin coals, so fiercely did they blaze.

"Smile and be happy while you may," she hissed, her hot breath coming through her lips like the blast from a furnace. "For ere the sun again gilds the summits of those rugged mountains, you will be lying cold and dead, my lady. I warned you not to come between us, but you heeded not my warning, and now your life shall pay the penalty."

They came in sight of the gypsy camp, and with a lingering kiss upon his bride's lips, the happy bridegroom whispered:

"We will keep our marriage a secret until after the queen's death. It will be better for us both. Good night, my darling, and meet me in the morning, with eyes as bright, and smile as sweet as ever."

He left her at the entrance to the little white tent that she occupied alone. As he walked away he turned once, and looking back, saw the moonlight kissing her fair face and gleaming hair, and thus she always seemed to him—a sweet, spiritual face and slender figure, beautified and glorified by the silvery light that shone round her like a halo. He liked best to remember her as she looked that night—that fatal night—doomed to bring so much misery and pain into both their lives.

CHAPTER III

"YOU HAVE WON MY LOVER'S HEART AWAY FROM ME, NOW, CURSE YOU, DIE!"

Little Firefly entered the tent and seated herself upon the edge of the snow-white bed, kept so smooth and neat by her own nimble fingers. As she did so, she fancied she heard a faint, rattling noise. She listened. It was not repeated, and she whispered:

"Only my fancy; that is all. How sad I feel to-night. I am a bride, and brides are always happy; but I—"

The sentence ended in a low sigh. She leaned her head upon her hands and sat plunged in deep thought. What had she done?

"How foolish I am!" she said, rising, with a nervous laugh. "How very foolish; and yet why does the thought that I have made a fearful mistake always haunt me?"

Ah! why, little Firefly? You will know soon enough. Do not seek to pierce the veil that separates from your young eyes the mystic future.

She threw herself, dressed as she was, upon the couch, and soon sunk into a peaceful sleep—the happy, innocent sleep of a young girl whose heart is as pure as the sparkling mountain dew that kisses with jeweled lips the dark, frowning peaks that seem to meet the fadeless blue of a summer sky.

Her regular breathing soon announced how tranquil her slumbers were, and a fiendish smile of satisfaction fitted across the hateful, swarthy countenance of Lauretta, the revengeful gypsy princess, as she peered in upon the fair sleeper.

With soft, velvet steps she advanced to the bedside and gazed with glittering eyes at Firefly's lovely face, longing to stamp it into the ground underneath her feet. It required all her self-control not to wind her long fingers around that waxen-like throat and throttle out the sweet life.

"But I can wait," she whispered, her white teeth gleaming like pearls in the moonlight, while a wicked smile wreathed her cruel lips. "I can wait an hour longer, and then the revenge will be all the sweeter. Ah, my pretty Firefly, that beautiful face will not appear so sweet and tranquil an hour from now!"

A faint, rattling sound came from a box she carried in one hand. She laughed softly, and whispered to herself:

"Be patient, my little friend Satan. You are as anxious as your mistress is for the work to be finished. But the quicker we strike, my pet, the quicker her sufferings will be over with—curse her."

Again the same sickening sound disturbed the silence. It was the warning rattle of a deadly rattlesnake.

God above! was this cruel, black-browed gypsy about to let loose the loathsome reptile to strike the fair, young girl a death blow? Merciful Heaven! what a fearful revenge!

Casting a look of hatred upon Firefly sleeping so sweetly, she stole noiselessly from the tent, and outside she paused, whispering excitedly:

"I am queen of the band at last. There is nothing in my way now, except her, and in a few hours she will be dead; then I am free to win his roving heart back again, and feel his lips upon my lips. I will wait until she is in a deeper sleep before I strike, and she will awaken only to face death. Ah, my fair little Firefly, your defiance of Princess Lauretta has doomed you to a fearful fate."

She entered her own tent and the silver moon smiled calmly over the sleeping camp, the only sound that disturbed the stillness of the starry night being that faint, warning rattle that came every now and then from Queen Lauretta's tent.

And all unconscious of the fearful danger hovering over her pretty, glittering head, little Firefly slept on, her parted red lips looking like the fresh, blossoming heart of a rose. But for the gentle rise and fall of her girlish bosom, one would have thought her a perfect figure of wax, so motionless was she.

But for a happy bride her slumbers were strangely broken and troubled that night by hateful dreams. Was it a warning of what was about to actually happen?

She dreamed she was alone in the midst of a deep, dark wood, the dense shadows of night falling around her, the mysterious murmur of the whispering trees sounding in her ears, and the heavy air was filled with a queer, hissing noise that was strangely familiar to her. She had heard it many times before. Where, she could not say, nor when, but she was conscious of a feeling of danger, and she longed for companionship, and the sound of a human voice to break this death-like silence that was slowly but surely driving her mad.

She looked hopelessly around her, but no sign of a human being was in sight. Oh, if some one would only come and speak to her it would relieve that fearful, oppressive feeling in her heart!

She raised her longing eyes up to the frowning heavens and a glad cry burst from her lips, for there shining brightly in the heavy, shadowy depths, she beheld two stars that twinkled like two beacon lights.

But as she looked again she saw that one star glittered and scintillated like a spark of fire, blinding and confusing her eyes with its fitful glow, while the other beamed down upon her, shedding a soft, mellow radiance over all. A heavenly halo seemed to linger where ever its luminous rays fell.

She reached up her hands, laughing aloud like a little child hoping to reach the stars, and as she did so, one fell broken and burning at her feet, while the other still shone on with that same steadfast, peaceful glow.

But oh, horrors, what was this fearful, crawling, wriggling thing that crept from the heart of the fallen star, and darted its poisonous-forked tongue at her, its wicked little eyes sending forth tiny streams of fire, while above the night-wind sighing through the ghostly trees sounded that warning rattle?

It was a monstrous snake, and each passing moment the hideous body grew larger. To the terrified girl it seemed as if ages were passing over her head, and still she could not tear her horrified gaze from that awful, yet fascinating object.

Oh, God! It was coming nearer and she tried to shriek aloud, but her tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth, and her dry, parched lips refused to move.

Slowly it raised itself, its fiery eyes still holding her gaze, and now she could feel the slimy coils tightening around her, crushing the life out of her body. Oh, kind Heaven, must she die alone and such an awful, awful death?

Suddenly thousands of dancing lights appeared before her eyes and the head of the reptile seemed to change, and take on a likeness to a human face, and as she stared in amazement, all traces of a snake had vanished, and before her eyes were the faces of Lauretta, the gypsy princess, and her own husband, Leon Costello, whom she had wedded that very night.

She shrunk back in fear and dismay, and then something whispered to her to look at the other star. She obeyed, and beheld a man's face, fair, handsome, tender, a gentle expression in the blue eyes, and with a wild, glad, cry, stretched up her hands to him and awakened.

She was trembling in every nerve when she opened her eyes, and, springing from the bed, she pushed back the masses of curling hair, and cried:

"Thank God! it is only a dream, but oh, heaven, what a terrible dream. I can feel the coils of that snake crushing me yet," and she shuddered violently.

So restless and nervous was she that she could not rest. She knew that sleep would not visit her eyes again that night, and pushing aside the heavy curtains that guarded the doorway of her tent, she murmured:

"I cannot remain in here after such a dream. The very air will stifle me. And the night is so lovely!"

She slipped softly from the tent out into the silvery moonlight. Pausing a moment she drew a long breath of relief, and then walked slowly in the direction of her favorite haunt, a wood not far from the camp.

How quiet and calm it was there beneath the green, whispering trees, and under the shadow of a great moss-grown rock, a clear, liquid spring bubbled and

sang its weary song throughout the sunny hours of the long day, and the moon-lit, mysterious nights.

Little Firefly paused when she entered the wood, and clasping her hands tightly over her wildly throbbing breast whispered:

"Oh, that face! that beautiful face of my dream! I shall see it; oh, I know I shall meet him some day and then—"

She covered her face with both hands, quivering in an ecstasy of delight, her young heart filled with delicious expectation. She had entirely forgotten that she was the bride of Leon Costello, the gypsy. Alas! poor little Firefly, her hero's pictured face had come too late!

"I wish he would come to me and take me out into the great big beautiful world with him!" she whispered, her eyes filled with a soft, misty light. "Oh, my king, my hero, my own beautiful lover!"

She had forgotten her gypsy husband's very existence.

Suddenly she broke into a little happy rippling laugh, and clapping her hands gleefully, she cried:

"I will look in the pretty, clear surface of the spring the same as I have read of other young girls doing, and perhaps I shall see his face! Ah, me! what bliss!"

Tripping over to the spring, her dainty feet scarcely seeming to touch the ground, she knelt down and gazed into the sparkling water.

Through an opening in the branches of the stately trees the moonbeams peered, and she could plainly see her own lovely face reflected in the lustrous surface. A shadow clouded her bright eyes, for there was no handsome, manly face, with eyes the color of the deep, blue sea and a smile like a burst of sunshine, pictured there beside her own, as she had fondly hoped there would be.

But what was the dark, threatening shadow that fell athwart the mellow, silvery path that the moonbeams formed? Surely it was no smiling lover's face that looked back at her with sullen, black eyes in whose murky depths the light of bitter hatred and revenge burned like fires from the infernal regions below. It was not the voice of love, sweet and low, like the rippling of a mountain stream, that hissed:

"You have won my lover's heart away from me. Now, curse you, die!"

CHAPTER IV.

"MY GOD, THAT FIERY-RED SCAR UPON YOUR ARM TELLS IT ALL, AND YOU ARE MY LONG-LOST CHILD."

With that hateful, revengeful voice, sounded the fearful, blood-chilling rattle that Firefly had so plainly heard in her dreams. Great God! had her dream of horror come to pass, or was she still dreaming?

"You have won my lover's heart away from me; now curse you—die!"

Again those cruel words were repeated, while a burst of laughter so wicked, so diabolical, that Firefly's heart stood still, rang through the wood.

Her staring, horrified eyes were fastened in uncontrollable fascination on the shimmering pool of water where she was kneeling, and she could not help but see the fearful picture back of her in its mirror-like surface, and oh, God, it was a wonder that her hair did not turn snowy white during that awful time.

Crouching close behind her, with the look of a fiend incarnate upon her livid, working face, was Princess Lauretta, her bitter rival, and in her hand she held a box from which proceeded the deadly rattle. Firefly's acute ears heard that sound, and she knew well what it was, for had she not heard it time and time again when she was roaming over the mountains in her frequent searches after flowers? Yes, she knew what it was, and she knew what the wicked Lauretta's real intentions were now, for like a flash she remembered how she had warned her, swearing that she would kill her if she robbed her of her lover. This, then was to be her fate. That heartless, soulless gypsy would let loose the rattlesnake she had in the box, and she—

A dark mist came before her eyes, and she thought she was dying, but once more she heard that hateful voice saying fiendishly:

"You are in my power at last, my pretty Firefly, and you can see how, by fluttering too close to the fire, you have burned your dainty wings. Now, you shall die, and I, the queen of the gypsies, will be in your place, for I shall win Leon Costello's heart just as sure as the morning dawns for me, but—not for you."

She opened the box, and an instant later the ugly head and beady eyes of the serpent were plainly visible beneath the same rays of moonlight that kissed little Firefly's pallid face and ashen lips. The forked tongue darted from side to side as if eager to strike the fatal blow, and that soul-terrifying rattle sounded nearer than ever.

"Ha! ha! a heavy price to pay for stealing a gypsy maid's lover," Lauretta laughed mockingly, her white teeth gleaming like a wolf's fangs from between her lips.

"Mercy! mercy!" Firefly gasped faintly, all hope dead within her breast, for she knew this woman's nature only too well.

"Mercy?" the gypsy princess shrieked, her eyes darting forth a glare of merciless hatred. "Fool that you are to expect

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